Constructing a System of Irregularities

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The Poetry of Bei Dao, Yang Lian, and Duoduo

By

Chee Lay Tan

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For my father,
Tan Lian Kim (1950-1986),
and his appreciation of art and beauty

One of the most intriguing and characteristically Chinese techniques in Chinese traditional paintings is "liubai," meaning to "leave whiteness behind." A painter may consciously keep parts of a painting empty to contrast black paint with white space. While such whiteness can be regarded as negative space because of the absence of ink, it also represents an active space emitting positive power. Not only does this white space empower the artist to balance the entire painting, unite the various images, and manage space, but it also enhances the legibility and visibility of individual elements, including images, colours, and strokes.

Mistiness is a form of liubai *in poetics.*

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PREFACE

The *hanyu pinyin* romanisation system is used throughout this book, although familiar place names such as Taipei and Hong Kong retain their customary spelling. Original Chinese characters and *hanyu pinyin* are listed in the Glossary at the end.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS OR CHRONOLOGY

IP -	Image Phrase
Talks –	Mao Zedong's 1942 Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature

CHAPTER ONE

THE CRITICAL CONTEXT AND THE CONSTITUENTS OF MISTY POETRY

Let me tell you, world,
I—do—not—believe!
Even if a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet,
Count me as number one thousand and one.
—"The Answer" (*Huida*)

告诉你吧，世界
我—不—相—信！
纵使你脚下有一千名挑战者，
那就把我算作第一千零一名。
——"回答"[1]

In the historical context of late Cultural Revolution China, these words by the poet Bei Dao in 1976 represent part of the most passionate resistance to the intense governmental control of literature. In the early 1970s, young Chinese students sent to the countryside began rejecting the Socialist realist literary forms prescribed by the Communist Party and started searching for an alternative, heterodox *Underground Literature* (*Dixiawenxue*), a term which in Maoist China referred to any literature produced and distributed without governmental sanction.[2] These youths, notably Bei Dao (1949-), Mang Ke (1950-), Duoduo (1951-), and Yang Lian (1955-), formed various underground "cultural salons" and exchanged examples of their experimental poetry that later came to be named *Misty poetry* (*Menglongshi*).[3] The relatively relaxed political thaw

[1] Bei Dao, *Notes from the City of the Sun*, p. 88.
[2] See Yang Jian, *Wenhua dageming zhong de dixia wenxue*.
[3] Menglongshi is translated variously as *Misty poetry*, *Poetry of Shadow*, *Opaque poetry*, and *Obscure poetry* by Wai-Lim Yip, McDougall, Palandri, and William Tay

that followed the death of Mao Zedong (1893-1976) and the downfall of the Gang of Four in 1976 (now called the Beijing Spring) provided an opening for the revival of modern Chinese literature, as well as other arts and intellectual discourses, after decades of Maoist strictures on literary and artistic production.

Among the experimental works that emerged in the literary scene, Misty poetry was one of the most influential in the period immediately after the Cultural Revolution.

Originally created in the socio-historical context of Cultural Revolutionary China in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Misty poetry is free verse characterised by structural and linguistic ambiguity. Its obscurity and irregularities were the underlying reasons for the coining of the name *Menglongshi* by orthodox Maoist critic Zhang Ming in 1980.[4] Emphasising polyvalent imagery and irregular syntax, Misty poetry engendered a multiplicity of meanings, often leading to interpretational indeterminacy. Some Misty poems were influenced by *Europeanisation* (*Ouhua*— -isms, subject matter, grammar, and vocabulary imported from the West) and Western poetics, especially imagism and modernism, the latter term being a highly contested form of counterdiscourse in the prevailing Chinese arts scene.[5]

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respectively. I use *Misty poetry* as the term of discussion here to follow Li Dian's *The Chinese Poetry of Bei Dao, 1978-2000: Exile and Resistance*, and its review by Paul Manfredi, who maintained that "despite the fact that 'misty' is neither a terribly good translation for the Chinese word *menglong*, nor an accurate description of what the poetry is[,] Li nonetheless uses 'Misty Poetry' as a now conventionalized term, which is to say a term that has more or less beaten out competitors in the game of literary/cultural nomenclature." See Li Dian, *The Chinese Poetry of Bei Dao, 1978-2000: Exile and Resistance* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006) and Paul Manfredi, "Review of The Chinese Poetry of Bei Dao, 1978-2000: Resistance and Exile," MCLC Resource Center Publication (Nov 2009 online version), http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/pubs/reviews/manfredi4.htm. (Accessed May 1, 2011). I further choose this translation for both its conciseness and felicity in translating the term *menglong*, especially in describing the poetic effect—Mistiness—portrayed by this poetry. "Poetry of shadows" lacks the same conciseness, "Opaque poetry" seems to write off any interpretational penetration in advance, while "Obscure poetry" has been used to refer to some Western poetry.

[4] Zhang Ming, "Lingren qimen de 'Menglong'," p. 28.

[5] Compare to Xiaomei Chen, "'Misunderstanding' Western Modernism," pp. 69-70.

Despite covertly subverting orthodox literatures (i.e. the Maoist form and language that embraced socialist realism), Misty poetry is not necessarily politically subversive. If subversiveness is the intention to undermine an existing established system or a set of beliefs—especially by using linguistic form and subject matter in particular—many critics within and outside the socialist literary establishment continued to view Misty poetry as an overtly subversive art form that resulted from and reflected the violent political suppression in the country, but the poems' actual subversive components have been unexamined and unexplored.

This book seeks to systematically examine the poetry of three leading Misty poets: Bei Dao, Duoduo, and Yang Lian; and how the aesthetics and irregular linguistics of their Mistiness present alternatives to orthodox socialist realism and other Chinese avant-garde poetry of the late 20th century. These three poets were chosen, in no specific order, as the foci of this book not only because they are among the most well-known Misty poets, having come to prominence in the late 1970s as part of the Misty Poetry movement, but also because all three possess a common exilic experience. They left China in the late 1980s and became leading members of the Chinese exile literature scene. Furthermore, they have continued writing innovative poetry from the 1970s to the present early 21st century, an adequate time period to systematically investigate the evolution of their poetics.

Bei Dao, the most famous of the three, co-founded China's first unofficial literary journal, the public "birthplace" of Misty poetry, *Today* (*Jintian*) in 1978. It became extremely popular among Chinese youths disillusioned by the Cultural Revolution and eager to read literature more stimulating than the monotonously propagandistic works officially permitted under Mao. Yang Lian, and to a lesser extent, Duoduo, enthusiastically contributed their poetry to the journal, and all three attained national fame with the creation of a new, individualistic poetic hero in their Misty poems such as "The Answer" above.

Later, they were targeted by the 1983 Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign which attacked artists accused of "deprecating" Chinese tradition in favour of foreign culture. Ironically, censorship by local authorities drew foreign media attention to these writers, while translated anthologies introduced Misty poetry to the international literary stage.[6] All three poets began receiving invitations to international poetry readings

[6] For instance, Soong, *Trees on the Mountain.*

and literary festivals as their works were seen as representative of avant-garde "New Writings" in the post-Mao era.

During the repression of the 1989 Pro-Democracy Movement, Bei Dao, Duoduo, and Yang Lian were again thrust into the international limelight following their exile from China. Bei Dao's politically subversive poem "Declaration" (*Xuangao*) was reproduced across Tiananmen demonstration banners, while Duoduo and Yang's outright condemnation of the massacre infuriated Chinese authorities.[7] The media attention surrounding the violence of 4 June consequently surrounded these poets and might have boosted their fame abroad since they became three of the most widely-translated modern Chinese poets. However, it also drew attention away from in-depth considerations of the three poets' artistic merits. Some examples of the politicised reception of their works in the West include Kevin Connolly's labelling of Bei Dao's poetry as a "poetry of dissent" and discussing the poets in terms of only their "swelling political anger" and "political conscience,"[8] apart from their aesthetic qualities.

Despite the trio's fame, there is at present only one book-length critical study on Duoduo by Maghiel van Crevel in 1996, and one on Bei Dao by the U.S.-based sinologist Dian Li in 2006. As Bei Dao and Yang were rumoured to be the leading Chinese candidates for the Nobel Literature Prize for years until it was awarded to Gao Xingjian in 2000,[9] why has their fame not generated a larger body of critical work?

One intriguing reason for the relative lack of literary scholarship, especially in China, about their oeuvres may be the poems' "Misty" quality. As an aesthetic quality and generator of political controversy, this Mistiness that plays such a major role in shaping the three poets' careers and oeuvres may have also prevented critics from truly understanding their works. In fact, the coinage of the name "*Menglong"* was derogatory: the above-mentioned Zhang Ming first described such poetry as "influenced by both the over-distortion of Western poetics [and Chinese syntax, and moreover as being] obscurely and eccentrically written." Zhang went as far as to condemn its "total incomprehensibility."[10]

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[7] See Bei Dao, "Biography."

[8] See Connolly, "Writing against the grain."

[9] See, for example, Wai, "Bei Dao struggles to 'unfold ethical landscapes'," and the webpage of Yang's publisher, Green Integer: http://www.greeninteger.com/book.cfm?-Yang-Lian-Yi-&BookID=58.

[10] Zhang Ming, "Lingrenqimen de 'Menglong'," p. 28.

This early imputation of Mistiness to poets influenced the subsequent critical reception of their Misty works. To orthodox poets, Mistiness was negatively perceived as difficult or politically subversive. While it is not possible to either generalise or simplify the views of non-orthodox poets towards Misty poetry, to some of the younger generations of avant-garde writers who emerged after the mid-1980s, including Zhejiang poet Cheng Weidong, Mistiness came to represent empty, pointlessly opaque pomposity.[11] Part of a growing literary trend of *Minjian* Literature—colloquial writings preoccupied more with the corporeal rather than the cerebral—some of these post-mid-1980s non-orthodox writers criticised the Misty poets for being non-colloquial and not reflecting mundane or gritty reality. However, some other avant-garde poets, such as Ouyang Jianghe (1956-) and Xi Chuan (1963-), wrote extremely complex poems themselves, even though they criticised Misty poetry.

So what is it about Mistiness, as a poetic quality in Misty poetry, that made members of the contemporary mainland Chinese poetry scene uncomfortable? Why is there a marked convergence of orthodox and avant-garde responses to Misty poetry?

In this chapter, I look at the background of the emergence of Misty poetry. I then trace the history of the concept of Mistiness to show that it is not as uncommon or unwonted in Chinese tradition as critics suggest. Next, after tracing the reception of the Misty poets' works, both in establishment and non-establishment circles, I argue that it is the obsession with realism deep in the modern Chinese literary consciousness that has transformed the quality of Mistiness in poetic language into a concept fraught with controversy and ambivalence.[12] This has, in turn, prevented the three poets under study from receiving the close thoughtful critical attention their oeuvres deserve. Then I introduce three important constituents of Misty poetry which are crucial for our understanding of its irregular poetics and Mistiness: the socio-historic background where Misty poets live and write, the imagery of the poems, and their linguistic elements.

The rationale and procedure of systematically applying stylometric (the analysis of image frequency and significance in a stylistic manner) and semiotic approaches in reading Misty poetry will then be explained. These approaches, even though not entirely objective and at times

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[11] Cheng Weidong, "Biele, Shu Ting Beidao!"

[12] I would, however, not go as far as the critic Zang Di, who argues that the history of modern Chinese poetry is nothing more than opposing and proposing Mistiness. See Zang Di, "Xiandai shige piping zhong de huise lilun."

debatable, still allow us to identify important imagistic and linguistic clues to construct a hermeneutical system that examines the irregularities of Misty poetics, as well as to appreciate the polysemy of the poets' works. No prior criticism has analysed Misty poetry using supporting statistical data on its imagistic and linguistic features, which is data that I substantiate my stylistic analysis with. Furthermore, much of previous scholarship has not addressed the more subtle, complicated aspects of Misty linguistics that are one of the foci of this book, alongside the study of the images in Misty poetry. The systematic application of these stylometric and semiotic methods here, although unable to replace careful qualitative analyses and close reading, help us analyse the highly irregular images, syntax, and the different "Misty" effects of the three poets, and provide evidence that Mistiness is a powerful tool to evoke a system of multifaceted significations and alternative aesthetics—the main thesis of this book.

Ironically, the emergence of Misty poetry has its roots in the complete reform of art in the Cultural Revolution proper (1966-69). During this period, an entire generation of educated youths travelled from cities to rural areas all over China, generating a process of informal cultural exchange. Not only were these youths (albeit forcibly) exposed to entirely different environments and the farming classes, but their interaction with new acquaintances of drastically different cultural and provincial backgrounds also widened their horizons. For periods lasting from a few very intensive months to more than a decade, they partook in literary interactions—secret literary salons, discussions, books, and notebook (*chaobenr*) exchange—and experienced physical labour and solitude during periods of self-romanticised vagrancy or travel.

Such travelling experiences can somewhat be viewed in the light of the voluntary and involuntary travels of scholars in Chinese intellectual history, such as that of historian Sima Qian (145-90 B.C.) and poet Su Dongpo (1037-1101 A.D.), among many others. Besides reading indigenous or translated works, either clandestine or not, travels were crucial preparations and exposures for the young poets' writing careers during the Cultural Revolution. Not only were the cultural appetites of these youths transformed in varying degrees, but their experimental writings, especially those later to be called Misty poetry, also began to slowly diverge from familiar Cultural Revolutionary slogans in the remote, unfamiliar environs, in an imposed "exilic" situation of total isolation from urbanity and familiarity.

According to numerous recollections, such as those of youths' experiences at the lakes of Baiyangdian in Hebei, hundreds of educated youths from Beijing, Shanxi, and Inner Mongolia actively discussed "philosophy, economics, history, politics, music, and art," as well as forbidden translated literatures of Neruda, Pushkin, and literary criticism of Belinsky during their Hebei residence.[13] Hence it came as no surprise that Baiyangdian accrued great cultural significance as famous poets such as Bei Dao, Duoduo, Genzi (1951-), and Mang Ke were all its short-term visitors or residents from 1968 to the mid-1970s. Yang Lian, in comparison, travelled all over China in the name of "experiencing life" when working for the Central Broadcasting Cultural Work Group after 1977.[14] Regardless of their reasons for travel, the three poets created a renewed, revised, condensed, or expanded form of internal cultural structure and substance which filtered into their Misty writings. The birth of Misty poetry reflected new cultural reconfigurations such as nostalgia for urbanity, rumination on urban or rural lifestyles, reflections of new experiences, or the result of inter-provincial exchanges.

Education, too, took a similar unconventional turn during the Cultural Revolution. Educational reform took place through labour in the countryside, forcing schools and formal learning institutions to remain shut.[15] Besides the newly acquired knowledge of labour such as farming or iron-casting, youths discussed translated literatures, classical poetry, and sciences in study "circles" (*quanzi*), which usually consisted of students originally from the same high school. Some noteworthy literary groups were Bei Dao's group from the Fourth Middle School, and Duoduo and Mang Ke's group from the Third Middle School.[16]

Even for Yang Lian, whose "labour teams" did not boast such literary circles, the education he gained in the fields was imperative to his Misty poetry, as it "educated him about the entangled relationship between man and earth"—thus explaining the title "Earth" (*Tudi*) of his first work.[17] Ironically, these alternative forms of real life and individually-determined, self-motivated education allowed them to be

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[13] For a description of the vibrant cultural scene in Baiyangdian during the Cultural Revolution, see for instance Song Haiquan, "Baiyangdian suoyi," pp. 133-65.

[14] Yang Lian, interview by author, 30 December 2005.

[15] For education reforms during the Cultural Revolution, see Pepper, *Radicalism and Education Reform in 20th-Century China*, pp. 352-465.

[16] See Zheng Xian, "Wei wancheng de pianzhang," pp. 93-116.

[17] Yang, interview.

partially exempted from imposed Maoist education and ideological obtrusion in formal classrooms (such as composing "big character posters" and writing political plays).[18] Bei Dao, who was receiving good education at the best school in Beijing, the Fourth Middle School, recalled, "I didn't feel that I was good at math and sciences, and the atmosphere of school was too controlling."[19] After terminating his formal schooling, he obtained a newfound education in the form of reading stolen Yellow-cover and Grey-cover books (translated books originally meant for internal circulation among party cadres) on war, literature, philosophy, and political science from closed libraries. Bei Dao, Duoduo, and Yang Lian later confirmed the importance of reading translated foreign literature during this period, a linguistic topic I will inspect in my syntactic analysis later.

Applying Michel Foucault's theory that power exists in the economy of discourse which is made up of knowledge, we see that it was neither these educational policies nor the suppression of the "autocratic literary black line" that was powerful. Instead, the greatest source of political power in Cultural Revolution China lay in the ability to manipulate social discourse, enforce popular belief, and subsequently determine knowledge. Therefore, more sophisticated literary works gave way to ossified Cultural Revolutionary literatures, such as "revolutionary model operas" (*geming yangbanxi*).

However, changes may occur to a balance of power when innovative counter-discursive elements attract enough attention in communicative channels. Foucault underscores such a power discourse: "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it."[20] The Misty poets' opposing strategy was their Misty discourse—individualised imagery and cryptic language—estranged from the standardised, class-determined poems dominated by the "mainstream red culture."[21] Not only did Misty poems offer counter-discursive substance and form to attract public attention, but the ways in which such discourse was presented—via big character posters, self-printed poetic journals,

[18] For radical educational reforms and their emphasis on practicality, see also Brugger, *Contemporary China*, pp. 377-79.

[19] La Piana, "An Interview with Visiting Artist Bei Dao."

[20] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 101.

[21] For examples of "mainstream red culture" and Cultural Revolutionary discourse, see Chen Sihe, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi jiaocheng*, pp. 164-68.

hand-copied manuscripts, by word-of-mouth, or sheer memorisation—also challenged conventional communicative channels. Hence, to destabilise the power discourse of the Cultural Revolution was not to directly counter it, but to circumvent it by defamiliarisation, and by Misty poetry's invention of a new discursive space and form, and by the use of silence. Silence in Misty poetry is in textual ellipses (such as textual gaps that omit conjunctions, or specificities such as names and times), which sometimes could be more powerful than the clamour of revolutionary propaganda.

After the Cultural Revolution, literature entered the "New Period" (*Xinshiqi*, 1977-1989), which was often perceived as a rejuvenated "renaissance," while the commitment to reform by the newly rehabilitated Deng Xiaoping in 1978 ushered in the Democracy Movement of 1978-1979—a long-awaited loosening of control. A 1979 speech on the new policies of arts management showed that Deng went as far as to say, "In terms of cultural creation, we advocate the free development of different styles and genres." [22] This provided the impetus for the disentanglement of politics and art, and paved the way for a less extreme ideology—"literature serves the people and socialism."[23] Many official doctrines that followed, such as "The Party Central Committee's Opinion on the Increased Enhancement of Chinese Culture" (February 1989), also hinted at the continuous loosening of political control on the cultural realm.

With the official press encouraging people to voice their feelings of discontent by putting up wall posters in 1978,[24] the literary magazine *Today* first appeared on 23 December 1978 in the form of a "big character poster" pasted on a wall near Xidan in downtown Beijing which came to be dubbed the "Democracy Wall." Edited by Bei Dao and Mang Ke, *Today* carried fiction, prose, and literary criticism, but its Misty poems enjoyed the greatest popularity. However, Misty poetry also drew the largest controversies, as we shall see shortly, when Deng's initial open policy to win over the support of intellectuals when solidifying his own power quickly became tightened. Writer Miklós Haraszti's observation that the policing of cultural activities in post-Stalinist socialism often

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[22] Deng, "Zai Zhongguo wenxue yishu gongzuozhe disici daibiao dahui shang de zhuci," p. 182.

[23] This slogan is the title of an editorial comment in *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) on 26 July 1980.

[24] For the political thaw around 1978, see Seymour, *The Fifth Modernization*, pp. 47-69.

vacillates between "*prohibition, tolerance* and *support*" is useful for our understanding of such highly vacillating "performances" in Chinese cultural direction after 1976.[25]

On top of the interventions by political leaders, ideological clashes became increasingly common, leading to the carnivalistic "cultural mania" (*wenhuare*) of the 1980s. From 1978, Scar Literature (*Shanghen wenxue*) by writers such as Liu Xinwu (1942-) encouraged literary blossoming with its outright negation of the Cultural Revolution and the holdovers from Mao's last years—derisively dubbed "Whatevers" (*Fanshipai*). Another group of older writers—collectively called "Returning poets," including Niuhan (1923-), Du Yunxie, and Ai Qing (1910-1996)—re-emerged in the late 1970s after a long silence. Their works were referred as "introspection literature" (*Fansiwenxue*)—work that criticises extreme Leftism, Bureaucratism, and adversities of Chinese society, as well as reflects upon the authors' own Cultural Revolution experiences.

Around the same time, a wide variety of responses were drawn to the new language and style of Misty poetry emerging from the underground scene. Overwhelmingly hostile critics considered Misty poetry to be Westernised, nihilistic, and anti-socialist, while a minority of scholars praised its unorthodox poetics and anti-propagandist stance. In between, sympathetic readers expressed concerns about the critical ambivalence towards Misty poetry during the peak of the Misty controversy (1979-1984) to the end of the 20th century. However, many past critics have not directly and profoundly analysed the complicated and ambiguous nature of Mistiness in Misty poetry. Before examining the different critical responses to Mistiness and to Misty poetry in general, I will trace the history of the concept of Mistiness in traditional poetics in the next section.

A Brief History of the Concept of Mistiness in Western and Chinese Poetics

In the West, the closest equivalent term to Mistiness may be "ambiguity." William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* defines ambiguity as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions

[25] Quoted in Barmé, *In the Red*, p. 17.

to the same piece of language."[26] Scholars have expanded Empson's concept of ambiguity by adding terms such as "resourcefulness" (I.A. Richards) or "extralocution" (W. Nowottny) to positively emphasise this multiplicity of meaning.[27] As Misty poetry is also translated as "Obscure poetry," "obscurity"—referring to alienating semantic opaqueness and near-incomprehensibility—is a concept that is applicable to the understanding of Mistiness.

In general, the longevity of the debate about Western "ambiguous" poetry, from medieval "Obscure poetry" and 17th century "Metaphysical poetry" to modernist and postmodernist "difficult" poetry, shows the value of poetic ambiguity. Some notable defenders of obscurity in Western poetics include the Italian scholar Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) who argued that the worth of poetry is increased by the obstacles along the way to its decipherment.[28] Renowned for his difficult poems, French symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) also claimed that "[poetry] is nothing if not difficult."[29] The quality of ambiguity is even more readily found in recent Western works, such as Eliot and Pound's modernist poetry, as well as Snyder and Ginsberg's postmodern poetry.

By comparison, Western readers may find it surprising that the concept of poetic Mistiness should generate so much controversy among post-Mao Chinese critics, since its characteristics were relatively widely accepted as an important aesthetic quality in pre-modern Chinese literary thought. In Chinese aesthetics, a parallel can be drawn between Mistiness and Liu Xie's (465-522) "*yinxiu*" in *Literary Mind and the Carving of the Dragon* (*Wenxindiaolong*). "*Yin*" means 'latent' and refers to unstated connotations, and "*xiu*," meaning salient, refers to a distinctly stated aphorism. The combination of the terms "latent" and "salient" not only emphasises the importance of *multiplicity,* but also that of poetry's *implicative* meanings.[30] In addition, the Chinese language itself is a major source of ambiguity, which, according to James Liu, becomes an advantage in poetry, "for it makes possible the expression of thought and

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[26] Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, p. 19. In fact, the Chinese translation for Empson's title is ***Menglong*** *de qizhong leixing* 朦胧的七种类型 (China National Academy of Fine Arts, 1996) (my emphasis).

[27] See Preminger, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 41.

[28] See "Obscurity," Ibid., p. 849.

[29] Quoted in Liang Zongdai, *Shi yu zhen*, p. 91.

[30] For discussions on "*yin*" and "*xiu*," see Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, p. 262.

emotion with the greatest economy of words."[31] However, such implicative meanings in Chinese have become highly conventionalised, even set rigidly, as traditional poetry becomes "implicative speech with clearly demarcated meanings."[32] This is where the ingenious polysemous characteristics of Misty poetics stand out from the presuppositions of traditional poetry.

One critical factor of Mistiness is its original self-expression that diverges from conventional ways of conceptualising and deciphering poetry. Such poetic individuality can be traced back to Huang Zunxian (1848-1905), the distinguished representative of the late Qing Poetic Revolution for his poetics of "originality and self-expression."[33] Huang's highly individualistic approach can be traced back further to earlier anti-traditionalist scholars, especially Yuan Hongdao (1568-1610), the leader of the *Gong'an* School. Besides advocating the more philosophical "innate sensibility," which refers to "the determination to be oneself and the realization of individuality,"[34] Yuan also emphasises "freshness, non-conformity and an absence of fixed forms,"[35] concepts which were later taken up by Misty poets again.

May Fourth Poetry (1917-1920s), Nine-Leaves poetry (*Jiuyeshige*, 1930s-40s), and Misty poetry were labelled the "three climaxes of modern poetry" by leading Swedish sinologist Göran Malmqvist when he was interviewed by Chinese poet-scholar Ouyang Jianghe.[36] While we may not go as far as to fully subscribe to such a lofty claim, it is still interesting to see that Mistiness, in many ways, accords with the characteristics of poems written in the first two "climaxes." For instance, May Fourth aesthetician Zong Baihua (1987-1986) advocated a theory of "aesthetic

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[31] James Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, p. 8.

[32] Xu Ying, *Shifa tongwei*, p. 189.

[33] For Huang's theory of the Poetic Revolution, see Schmidt, *Within the Human Realm*, pp. 47-57. I do not claim that Huang's works are the *source* of poetic individuality, as we can certainly trace further to earlier works such as *Shijing* (*Book of Odes*) and *Chuci* (*Songs of Chu*). Instead, I am highlighting the *Gong'an* school as an important, and possibly more direct, influence to later poetry which emphasises original self-expression and individuality.

[34] Chih-P'ing Zhou, *Yüan Hung-tao and the Kung-an School*, p. 46.

[35] Cited in Ibid., p. 48.

[36] Ouyang, "Wo de xin zai Xianqin – Ma Yueran jiaoshou de zhuanfang." It is worth noting that the "School of Nine Leaves poetry" was not yet a school in the 1930s-40s, but was only constituted as such *post facto* by the publication of an anthology of their work in the 1980s.

distance" to deliberately distance art from practical and scientific considerations.[37] Poets with who wrote with such an aesthetic ideology include symbolists Li Jinfa (1900-1976), Wang Duqing (1898-1940), and Mu Mutian (1900-1971). Through maintaining a remoteness from tangible subjects and direct feelings, symbolist poetry creates an obscure and cryptic atmosphere. Thus Li was dubbed the "Poet eccentric" for his peculiar metaphors and irregular language. Wang's 1926 poetic manifesto perfectly sums up the School's obscure inclination: "Explicitness is the biggest problem for poetry; begging for comprehension is the biggest problem for poets!"[38] Such non-explicitness and hypnotic suggestiveness in Wang's French symbolist-influenced poetry was to re-emerge in Misty poetry almost fifty years later.

Later in the 1940s, Nine-Leaves poetry emerged out of a subversion of the overt sloganeering of Resistance Poetry during the Japanese invasion. The popularisation of Anglo-American modernism during the 1930s and 1940s by poets such as Mu Dan (1918-1977) and Yuan Kejia (1921-) reemphasised the importance of aesthetics in poetry. Then in the 1930s, an interesting exogenous factor occurred: English modernist poet William Empson, who had just completed *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), began teaching contemporary British poetry, including works by T.S. Eliot, and W.H. Auden, at the South-West Associated University (Xinan Lianhe Daxue) in China. Besides influencing South-West students, such as Mu Dan, Yuan Kejia, and Du Yunxie (1918-), Empson's impact in Chinese poetic modernism was well documented by scholars such as Wang Zuoliang.[39]

When the third poetic climax arrived in the form of Misty poetry, not only did young Misty poets have limited access to May Fourth and Nine-Leaves modernist poetry during their early poetic careers because of the rigid educational curriculum and the tight book control of the Maoist period, but the young poets were also generally uninterested in these early works. In the wealth of reminiscences written by, and interviews with, Misty poets, there is almost no mention of these pioneer poets. Particularly, the exiled poet Bei Dao noted his generation's lack of interest in these poems, and after "flipping through" May Fourth poets Bian Zhilin

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[37] See Lin Tonghua, *Zong Baihua meixue sixiang yanjiu*, p. 213.

[38] Wang Duqing, "Tan shi, " p. 76.

[39] See Wang Zuoliang, "Tan Mu Dan de shi," p. 183. Not only was Empson the editor of the inspirational literary journal *Standard* (*Biaozhun*), but he also introduced many modernist texts to China.

(1910-2000) and Feng Zhi's (1905-1993) poetry for the first time, he seemed unimpressed.[40] Bei Dao had, however, acknowledged that for his generation, "the 'translation style' of Chinese language that [Nine-Leaves poets] created became a vehicle for expressing creative impulses and seeking new linguistic horizons."[41]

The above outlines confirm that Mistiness, albeit with a more secured foundation in the Western context, is a recurring concept in Chinese poetics. Furthermore, they yield a rather surprising finding: that the Mistiness of Misty poetry is not indebted to the earlier Chinese modernist poetry of the first two "climaxes." Hence simple deduction, as well as Bei Dao's comment about his generation's penchant for the "translation style," seems to suggest Misty poetry's closer kinship with Western poetics. Such Europeanised tendencies are another reason for the many negative receptions of Misty poetry, which I shall discuss in the next section. However, I shall first point out that such preconceptions of Misty poetry as "Europeanised" do not fully do justice to the profundity of its poetic Mistiness. Rather, Misty poetry inherits and expands upon the aesthetics of poetic Mistiness in not just one, but in *both* the Chinese and Western traditions—an argument which I shall further develop later in this chapter.

Critical Responses to Misty Poetry

Let us now examine the different categories of critical responses to Misty poetry. The first category is the authorities' and socialist realist old-guards' (such as renowned poet Ai Qing) reactions to the overt/covert political ideology of Misty poetry. In general, their negative response was in line with the policies of major cultural-political campaigns after 1976, such as the Anti-liberalisation Campaign (March 1979), the attack on the "negative social effects" of controversial arts (January 1980), the Anti-Spiritual-Pollution Campaign (October 1983), and the Campaign against Bourgeois Liberalisation (January 1987, which aimed to discredit Western political concepts and to re-emphasise the CCP's ideology). Most notably, Beijing authorities clamped down on *Today* in 1980, and Misty poets were again targeted by the Anti-Spiritual-Pollution Campaign for their "decadent influence from the West" when the CCP perceived that the excessive liberalness of the media and art had become a threat to

[40] Ouyang, "Wo de xin zai Xianqin."
[41] Bei Dao, "From the Founding of *Today* to Today."

Communist ideology. Bei Dao—widely considered to have the most political slant among the Misty poets, possibly because of the overwhelming popularity of his poems such as "The Answer"—was the chief blacklisted target of the campaigns. Later, Yang Lian and Bei Dao's works were banned in 1983 and 1986 respectively. Though Duoduo managed to publish his poetry collections, he was informed by his newspaper that he was "under internal supervision" by the Public Security Bureau and hence he could expect no promotion and salary increment. Bei Dao revealed that, to the authorities reading his poems, "their greatest danger was a matter of language. [The subversive language provided young people] a way to express themselves which was new because it did not resemble official discourse."[42]

Mainly concentrated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the intolerance of the socialist realist old guard was based on pure anger or incomprehension which demonstrated little critical artistic consideration. Among the hundreds of criticisms in the leading poetry magazines and newspapers, including *Poetry Exploration* (*Shi Tansuo*) and *Stars* (*Xingxing*), the most prominent was by Ai Qing, the Vice-Chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association. He lambasted Misty poets for their "self-indulgent centre of creativity" and "undesirable Western modernist influence,"[43] and specifically attacked Bei Dao's "Life" (*Shenghuo*, early-1970s) by claiming that it was absurd for the title to be longer than the one-word-content: "net" (*wang*).[44] What Ai implied is that linguistically, a single word alone, without a defining subject noun phrase, verb phrase, or object/complement, cannot constitute a poetic sentence, much less an entire poem. Furthermore, the state of Mistiness evoked by the indeterminate image "net" certainly obscures readers' interpretation.

Although "Life" is actually the last verse of "Notes from the City of the Sun," it was mistaken by Ai for a full poem. Such ambiguity within a poetic structure is still largely unprecedented in Chinese poetic history. While incomprehension is the obvious cause for these hostile reactions, jealousy over Misty poetry's wide publicity and international fame might be the underlying reason for the orthodox poets' attacks. The rejection of the Misty style by Ai and by famous soldier-poet Gong Liu (1927-) was probably in the unspoken interests of their own orthodox poetic style and

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[42] La Piana, "An Interview with Visiting Artist Bei Dao."
[43] Quoted in Gao, "Ta zhuwangzhe shidai," pp. 73-74.
[44] Bei Dao, *Notes from the City of the Sun*, p. 88.

with the aim of denying heterodox newcomers mainstream literary recognition.[45]

While Ai and Gong's negations of Misty poetry targeted its style, criticisms by orthodox critics after 1983 shifted to its content after the authorities' condemnation of its political heterodoxy in the early 1980s. For instance, Li Jun's telling title reads: "Marxism is not to be Replaced by Existentialism—On the 'Anti-Rational' Proposition of the 'Emerging [Misty] Poets'"[46] Lu Yang condemned Yang's poetic ideology for "greatly glorifying repulsive acts" such as dissolution and sexual liberation.[47] In general, the fury of orthodox critiques targeted Misty poetry's thematic opacity, which was seen as an ideological challenge to the dominant Maoist obsession with clarity and simplicity of meaning. In fact, the latter's covert motive was to limit the individual's control over his own interiority, and to undermine the writer's literary subjectivity, which has become a defense of the autonomy of both literature and human subjectivity against Mao's anti-humanist injunctions, an observation proposed by scholars such as Liu Zaifu.[48]

After the Anti-Spiritual-Pollution Campaign was abruptly called off in 1984, literature in China entered a new phase of political liberalisation and pluriformity. A wealth of more than seventy schools, "-isms" and currents, many of which were preoccupied with colloquialism that was contrary to the grandiosity of the Misty poets, sprouted within the short span of time between 1985 and 1988.[49] Among the first to emerge of these schools, now collectively labelled "post-Misty" (*Hou-Menglong*), were the rebellious Campus poets (*Xiaoyuan shiren*)—a general term for poets who were young undergraduates. Their preoccupation with mundaneness led to their hostility against Misty poets' more high-flown, cerebral values. Henceforth, the second category of the reception of Misty poetry consisted of more in-depth criticism of Misty poetics—including its language and imagery—by these better-educated poets.

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[45] For a detailed outline of the debate on Misty poetry, especially the attacks on Mistiness, see Tay, "Obscure Poetry," pp. 133-57. Particularly, Gong Liu's criticisms of the poetry of Misty poet Gu Cheng (1956-1993) sparked the Misty controversy. See Yao, *Menglongshi lunzhengji*, p. 1.

[46] Li Jun, "Buneng yong Cunzai zhuyi qudai Makesi zhuyi," p. 14.

[47] Lu, "Moba fuxiu dang shenqi," p. 55.

[48] See, for instance, Liu Zaifu, *Liu Zaifuji*, pp. 225-39.

[49] See Xu Jingya, *Zhongguo xiandai zhuyi shiqun daguan 1986-1988*, pp. 1-5.